

Lowden State Park

Garren Beck
Oregon High School, Oregon
Teacher: Sara Werckle

There is no doubt that Illinois State Parks have influenced our state's history. This idea of having state parks was a great idea. I live in the town of Oregon, Illinois and we are gifted with some beautiful parts in this little town. Out of all these parks, however, Lowden State Park has to be the most widely influential across the state.

Around 1829, John Phelps entered the Rock River Valley. This area was called Sinnissippi by the local Indians. Phelps had no intention of staying in this area, but the beauty of the bluffs near the rivers intrigued him. In the summer of 1833, Phelps hired a French guide who was employed with the fur company in the Rocky Mountains. They noted all the valley's potential resources. This area was very wide open and safe for exploration because of the permanent dispossession of the Indians in 1832. They ran into a tent near a bank, which was erected by Colonel William Hamilton, son of Alexander Hamilton, who was an old friend of Phelps. William informed Phelps of a location about three miles west "that could not be surpassed in point of beauty." Phelps then went and checked it out, not needing any further persuasion. He remained long enough to raise a crop before he went and got his family, returning permanently in 1835. Many other people came to this beautiful area and settled. In 1869, this town was officially recognized as a city, Florence, which we know today as Oregon.

The beautiful area that Phelps spoke of is the location of Lowden State Park. A Chicago attorney by the name of Wallace Heckman, who was an assistant manager of the University of Chicago, purchased this land in 1898. He and his wife grew fond of the

outdoors while college students. The Heckmans became patrons of the arts back around the Chicago area. They took their two interests and put them together, making an artists' colony on their Rock River property. This colony was called "Eagles Nest," which referred to a tall, dead cedar tree that clung to the river bank. This tree inspired a poet Margaret Fuller to write a poem called, "Ganymede to His Eagle." The Eagles' Nest was home to many creative people for nearly 50 years. One of these artists included Lorado Taft, who created the Black Hawk statue. Taft was the moving spirit behind the colony, which flourished six years after Taft's death in 1942. In 1945, the Sixty-Third General Assembly designated the 273-acre site as Lowden State Park. The sixty-six acres that consisted of the actual Eagles' Nest were transferred to Northern Illinois University as a use for an outdoor teacher education program six years later.

Black Hawk statue is Lowden's most influential piece. Lorado Taft created this 50-foot tall statue as a tribute to Native Americans. The thought of creating this statue was said to come from one evening at the Eagles' Nest with other members, while they were staring at the view from the bluffs. Taft was helped by a young sculptor of the Chicago Art Institute named John G. Prasuhn. The statue has a six-foot base, and is reinforced with iron rods. The hollow statue is eight to three feet thick. Its weight is estimated to be around 100 tons, and thought to be the second largest monolithic statue in the world. The statue's original name, however, is "The Eternal Indian." Even though the statue is commonly associated with Black Hawk the Sauk Indian chief, Taft dedicated the statue to all Native Americans. The statue also does not look anything like Black Hawk, which is another proof that Taft wanted it to be for all Native Americans. "There he stands, as tall as the trees, The Eternal Indian, researching Oregon and its neighboring

communities, I thoroughly comprehend his vigilance, and the affectionate regard apparent in those massive features so carefully by his creator,” describes the statue very well, and how people from the community and visitors from out of town see the statue.

This state park by the Lowden, in no doubt, has influenced the surrounding community of Oregon with its beauty. Lorado Taft looked upon this area of beauty, and thought of the idea of this great statue to honor the people who once settled this area.

There are other parks in this area, but Lowden is by far the most widely influential. As a resident of Oregon, Illinois, I am proud to say that I see that statue every day and receive the privilege of seeing the beauty of the park, which others around the world will seldom or never get the chance to ever see. [From Keith Call, *Great Britain*, “Lowden State

Park,” *Illinois Department of Natural Resources*,

<<http://dnr.state.il.us/lands/Landmgt/PARKS/R1/LOWDENSP.HTM>>. (Oct. 14, 2006);

Paul Ricker, “Illinois State Parks,”

<<http://www.astro.uiuc.edu/~pmricker/interests/outdoors/il-state-parks.html>>. (Oct. 14,

2006); and Lindsay Shaw, Lowden-Miller State Forest.]